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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000683

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: CONDUCT OF NATIONAL ASSEMBLY POLLS
RELATIVELY TRANQUIL

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons: 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: This preliminary report on Nigeria's April 12 National Assembly elections provides an overview of Nigeria on election day. More detailed observations and analysis will be provided septel. The elections held in a relatively calm atmosphere. Turnout was fair in most of the areas directly observed by EmbOffs, with percentages ranging from under 30 to about 60 percent. Most polling stations opened late, many were under-staffed. Most INEC staff seemed under-trained. Domestic monitors were present at most sites visited and the major political parties, PDP and ANPP, had almost universal coverage of the polling sites. Coverage by other political party agents was good in their respective areas of strength. Embassy observers noted various technical irregularities in the voting procedure which seemed to be the result of inadequate training and preparation by INEC. These anomalies did not appear to undermine the integrity of the voting process or vote tabulation at the individual polling stations. However, observers saw confusion and lack of organization at numerous vote collation centers. Overall, INEC managed a barely adequate performance in polling places on Saturday but most people were willing to give INEC the benefit of the doubt. However, the difficulties at the collation centers are cause for concern because they could cast doubt on the quality of the vote tabulation process and impact expectations for Saturday's Presidential and Gubernatorial polls. INEC needs to focus on its performance in the next round. (Specific recommendations in Para 11.) Too few results are in for an assessment of the overall quality of the legislative elections. END SUMMARY.

ATMOSPHERE

2. (C) Nigeria's National Assembly elections held on April 12, in a relatively calm atmosphere through most of the country. There were reports of violence and irregularities from parts of the south-south (Delta oil region) and southeast (home of Nigeria's third-largest tribe, the Igbo) and isolated incidents reported throughout the country, but there was probably less violence on this Saturday than on most that preceded it this year. The southwest (home to incumbent President Obasanjo and the seat of the Yoruba tribe) and the north (home of the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group) were relatively calm.

TURNOUT

3. (C) The turnout appeared fair throughout the areas observed by EmbOffs. Lagos Conoffs reported a turnout of about 30 percent at the polling sites they visited in Rivers State. In Lagos, they estimated turnout at about 40 percent. In Katsina State (in the northwest and home to ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari), and Kano state (a northern state that has either the largest or second largest population in Nigeria), turnout was running at about 50 percent. EmbOff reported between 40 and 50 percent turnout at the sites visited in Edo State. In Kaduna State (a state with a Christian/Muslim mixed population) and Plateau State (an ethnically-diverse state in Nigeria's middle belt) some sites had a 50 to 60 percent turnout.

INEC PERFORMANCE

4. (C) Nationwide, few polling places opened at the 0800 starting time. In the few areas that received timely materials, polling got underway at about 0900. In most areas, polling began after 1000. Observers in Imo State reported that INEC performed well. In a few places scattered around the country, polling did not begin until early afternoon. The cumbersome voting process prescribed

by INEC required between 3 and 5 minutes per voter to accomplish in most stations. (The best-run ones could manage a voter per minute.) In many locations, party agents or observers filled in for the shortfall in INEC officials. In most of these cases, the party agents did not act overtly partisan and contributed to the success of the polling exercise.

SITE UNSEEN -----

15. (C) In two cases that Emboffs are aware of, one in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and one in Katsina State, a polling site was missing altogether. In the FCT, DCM encountered a group of perhaps two hundred registered voters angry that INEC had not set up their polling station. Two other co-located polling stations were operating on the same premises. In Katsina, PolOff discovered a site, complete with ballot boxes and a fifteen-year-old Polling Assistant, but no materials and no indication that any voters had registered there. About 50 meters away, another polling site was up and running with 20-30 people waiting their turn to vote.

DOMESTIC MONITORS AND SECURITY -----

16. (C) Domestic monitors, including the Nigeria Labour Council (NLC), FOMWAN (a Muslim women's organization), The Monitor Group (TMG) and the Justice, Democracy and Peace Commission (JDPC), were present at many sites. The JDPC was the only one seen in Benin City. The two major political parties (PDP and ANPP) had almost universal coverage of the widespread polling sites, with the parties strongest in the district generally better trained in election day activities than many INEC officials.

17. (C) Security was present at most polling sites; policemen manning the polls were generally unarmed. Prisons, Immigration and Customs officers were present during the voting, and in some areas, soldiers had been deployed to help prevent violence.

SECRET BALLOTS AND VOTE TABULATION

SIPDIS -----

18. (C) Many polling sites made no provision for secrecy of the ballots as voters made their choices. The extent of secrecy's compromise varied from voting in the middle of a crowd to party agents observing individuals' selections. In one case, a PDP party agent was taking blank ballots from voters and marking the ballots himself. True secrecy was a rarity, found in perhaps 10 to 20 percent of stations visited.

19. (C) INEC's byzantine rules created some confusion at polling sites, but normally the party agents and poll workers were able to agree on how elections would be run. The atmosphere of consensus and cooperation frayed at the end of the day as results from polling stations were collected and forwarded to collection centers and on to the state capitals. Unfamiliarity with the INEC forms caused much of the confusion in collating the results, and in some cases, zealous party agents would not allow results to be collated in the presence of "unauthorized" persons, whether in possession of identification or not. Many collation sites operated with only candles or lamplight. Some had to be moved because not even these forms of illumination were available.

110. (C) COMMENT: INEC managed to perform adequately (barely) on Saturday. In spite of irregularities in the process, most witnesses believed that the irregularities were more technical in nature (e.g., whether the polling officials stamped the back of the ballot paper before issuing it) than substantive. Party polling agents voiced few complaints to Emboffs. Still, INEC could have done a much better job with a little more planning. Distribution and collection of the ballots was not well organized on April 12, and its rule books were confusing. INEC needs to stick to schedule and revamp its transportation plan to improve its performance by this Saturday. While the materials were sufficient for the National Assembly elections, the larger turnouts expected for Presidential and Gubernatorial elections could cause some polling sites

to run short (and raise tempers). If INEC does not resolve some of its problems by the April 19 elections, the quality and efficiency of the Presidential ballot could be questioned.

11. (U) RECOMMENDATIONS: It is not too late for INEC to succeed. It needs at a minimum to:

- improve its delivery schedule to ensure polling stations open on time;

- issue radio clarifications during the week and produce a "cheat-sheet" to provide the basic guidelines for voting;

- ensure that poll agents understand the need for secrecy in balloting; and

- clarify and improve the tabulation and collation process.

JETER